

Keynote speaker inspires students at youth conferences

"What we do here, matters there. What happens there, matters here." That was the message Dr. Samantha Nutt delivered to the students at both the Winnipeg and Westman Youth conferences this month.

Students sat spellbound as the founder and executive director of War Child Canada spoke about her work, life experiences and philosophy. "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights begins with these words," she said, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights."



Dr. Nutt considers a question posed by a student.

Dr. Nutt also told the students that all people are entitled to the same rights, like the right to an education, the right to practice or not practice a certain religion and the right to be treated fairly before the law.

"Then why," she asked, "are hundreds of thousands of people in this world denied these protections? In this world, our world, your world, is this acceptable to us?"

Although Dr. Nutt spoke of atrocities and war, she also connected with the students by talking about herself.

"The real upheaval in the Nutt house," she said with a smile, "was the discussion following a message from my school which stated that I was a destructive force in a sound environment."

Dr. Nutt's point was that anyone is capable of walking in her shoes, whether they are at the bottom, middle or top of their class.

The mood changed when she played a sound clip from when she and her group found themselves trapped on the frontline of the Congo-Rwanda war. She described hiding in a basement of a house and hearing the 'pop, pop, pop, pop' of gunfire and then footsteps upstairs. Although they feared the worst, it turned out to be a Canadian Peacekeeper. Their evacuation, amid chaos, was captured on the tape.

Dr. Nutt did not hold back. She spoke of the assassination of her Iraqi friend, the kidnapping and execution of a CARE worker, and the horror of seeing mothers carrying dead children in the aftermath of a battle during the Somalian civil war.

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The Rights Connection by Jerry Woods - Chairperson

A new generation looks at human rights

Over the past seven years I have had the honour of hosting the Manitoba Human Rights Youth Conferences. During this time, the conferences, which have been held in Winnipeg, Thompson, The Pas and Brandon, have been attended by over 2000 students from across the province. We have talked with them, and they have talked to us.

The goal of the youth conferences is to let young people know that human rights are not just for adults. They are told that their rights include freedom from discrimination and equality of opportunity. The workshops help them understand their rights and responsibilities at school, in the workplace, where they live or where they are entertained. We examine discrimination based on such factors as disability, age, sex, religion and ancestry. The interactive sessions deal with racism, harassment and accommodation.

We have also learned from the students. They are concerned about bullying and how it has become more violent, and in some cases more sophisticated. They clearly see the dangerous aspects and psychological damage of "cyber bullying" where the bully remains anonymous, but ever threatening.

Yet with their optimism and energy, students know that by doing more than thinking and talking they can affect change and make things better. After our conferences, many students take local and international human rights messages back to their schools. They have held their own conferences, given presentations to elementary school students and have even held human rights marches in their communities. Young people continually remind us that words should be followed by action.

Students are also told that human rights are evolving and are asked what they believe should be added to their future rights. Not surprisingly, they see human rights protections extended to such issues as the environment, food and shelter. The emergence of this new generation thinking extends well beyond the human rights codes of today.

Human rights protections began because there was no law against discrimination. We should be listening to the young people of today to determine where protections should be extended in the future. All of us have a part to play in the evolution of human rights.

Banner project gets help

Students at the *Our World, Your World, My World* Manitoba Human Rights Youth Conferences will be getting a little

help from Headingley Correctional Centre's Tailor Shop and COR Enterprises in Brandon. The students at both the Winnipeg and Westman conferences completed their part of the Peace by Piece Project in celebration of the 60th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The "Peace by Piece" youth conference session challenged students to take on the values and goals of the Universal Declaration. The students were given one hour to work on a piece of material and design a personal message. Their messages will form part of a larger banner. When assembled, the banner will be approximately a 7 metre wide circle, and delivered to the Manitoba Legislature on International Human Rights Day December 10, 2008.

Inmates at the Headingley Correctional Centre Tailor Shop will be sewing the pieces together. Trades Instructor Polly Cook says that this type of project is a gift for both the giver and receiver. "The inmates who work in the shop are learning a useful skill that they take with them when they leave. Many have gone into their own business making star blankets," she says.

Also helping with this project is COR Enterprises in Brandon, which is a vocational training center for developmentally challenged adults. COR Enterprises provides training, counselling & skill development through the manufacture of wooden children's & doll furniture, lawn furniture and decor, craft items, baby quilts, as well as janitorial and kitchen programs.



MacGregor Collegiate reveals its piece of the banner at the Westman conference in Brandon.

She spoke of child soldiers, the millions upon millions of AKA guns available at a mere six dollars, and described the devastation caused by cluster munitions.

"Believe me when I tell you that war is the world's number one business," she said.

She also talked about coltan, a metallic ore used in cell phones, video games and computers. The exportation of coltan, she said, financed weapons and fuelled war in the Congo, the worst war in African history. "Over 4 million people have died in the Congo," she said, "the deadliest war since WWII."

Coltan continues to be sold and exported illegally from the Congo, she added.

In conclusion she told students there were four ways they could make a difference: learn, give, ask and act. "This is our world, your world, my world," she said adding, "it is not about charity. It's about our common humanity. It's your legacy, your choices."

Jane Mcbee returns from Africa

Nothing could have prepared Jane Mcbee for the welcome she received on her first day in Uganda. Accompanied by other Canadian grandmothers, she was driven to a small village, just outside of Kampala. They were greeted by grandmothers and their grandchildren holding up a sign which read, "Welcome Canadian Grandmothers." Many had travelled long distances just to take part in this visit. Those who lived in the village spent the entire day preparing a meal of cassava root, bananas, rice and greens. Everything was cooked in banana leaves over an open fire.

Mcbee was one of twelve grandmothers from seven Canadian provinces who traveled to Uganda, South Africa and Swaziland for two and a half weeks visiting African grandmothers and their orphaned grandchildren. They live in communities ravaged by HIV and AIDS, their daughters, sons, mothers and fathers struck down by the disease. Grandmothers, who at this time in their lives traditionally are cared for by their children, have found themselves raising their grandchildren instead.

Mcbee also remembers a particular twelve year old boy, dressed in a suit, who began to read a speech for the visiting Canadian grandmothers. When he spoke of his mother and father who died, he was so overcome with emotion that one of the staff from the Mobile AIDS Organization read the rest of his prepared speech for him. Mcbee says she later went to the boy, gave him a hug, and told him to be strong. "Later he came to me and said 'if I had wings, I would fly to your country to be with you.' I told him to study hard so that he could apply for a scholarship and attend school in Canada," she says.

On March 8, International Women's Day, the Canadian grandmothers marched with women in Swaziland. Mcbee refers to this as a historical event since Swazi women had never marched together before. "The march started with 1,000 women, but by the time we arrived at the stadium where the official proceedings were to take place, there were over 1,800."

According to Mcbee everyone wore red sarongs with red, blue or yellow tops representing the colours of the Swazi flag. She says these colours usually are reserved for the elite and privileged in the country. "The women wanted to reclaim the colours of Swaziland," she explains, adding that at one point male hecklers shouted to the women, "you should be home cooking" and one woman yelled back, "those days are over."

Over the next year Mcbee says she has made a commitment to the Stephen Lewis Foundation which sponsored the Grandmothers to Grandmothers campaign, to talk with various organizations about her experience.



African grandmothers carry a banner on their first women's solidarity march.

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